Archive #0, Entry #1: In Vanity

In Vanity

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3rd year of the reign of King Platinum of the unicorns

Location: Court room of Castle Corona, high seat of Duke Bluehart

Duchy of Westerlot, Unicornia

“And that is the name you propose for this realm, is it?”

I cringed slightly, as the taller of the two stallions gave a powerful snort that echoed off the stone walls of the room. It was quite evident he had little respect for the other, but was forced by bonds stronger than mere liking to submit to him nonetheless. Besides, Duke Bluehart was well known for being a stickler and a thornbrush in general. He didn't have much respect for *anypony*. If not for his well-honed skills in combat and even greater ability of command, he would never even have been crowned in the first place. As it was, though, he was the marshal of Unicornia – or, at least, the realm that was possibly going to be named Unicornia if the lords of the realm agreed with the king's decision – and his votum and voice carried a considerable amount of power in the budding kingdom. However brutish and gruff his manners, he could not simply be brushed aside.

King Platinum, High Prince of Throne and Duke of Cornica, Heritor of the Aurum Union, Liege of Lords and King of the Unicorns, sighed. It was well know that this was the confrontation he had dreaded most out of all the lords beneath him, but even I could not be sure whether or not he'd expected it to go this badly. My sister might have known, but we never talk anymore – since her marriage to the king, she has become too petty and selfish for me to stand.

I watched with tense eyes as the young king gave a brief shake of his head before replying. “Yes, Bluehart. It is not yet well known, but once I have the support of all the electors I will let it become public knowledge, after which a de jure title can be given weight enough to stand.” He gestured out of a window, pointing toward the northwest. “It is well known that Duke Revelant of Mane is not going to submit to me, and neither are several of the *free lords* – pesky as they may be – separating his realm from ours. The Crystal Empire is surely not going to heed, and they have almost as many unicorns as we do.”

Bluehart gave a decidedly noncommittal grunt, but his brows were furrowed in thought; at last, a good sign from the sour old coot. Evidently this spurred the king on enough to keep going. “Look. The kingdom is all fine and well. We have no rebels in our midst, the peasants are reasonably happy – or quiet, at least – and since the lords have accepted my proposal of allowing mares to inherit, the succession is secure. Yes, yes, I know, my daughter is but a foal and there's nothing that can be said of her talents at ruling any kingdom – nor will there be any time soon – but princess Platinum is not the issue here, Bluehart.”

I covered my mouth with my hoof, concealing my yawn best I could. The king was a master of grand speeches and debate, but as well as that was it did give him a tendency to be overly elaborate at times. Not that it didn't help him to make his points, but still. These things could go on for hours – and had done so on several occasions before this one. All the luck I had to count on for getting any sleep tonight was that Bluehart was the polar opposite of that; he would reach a decision, and stick to it. Once the king had made his case, the duke would have his answer, and give it; and that would be the end of that, one way or another.

Hopefully.

“It would be preposterous of me to claim kingship over an entire race, and that's as simple as that. Besides, what then of the earth ponies of the realm? Thanks to the utter idiocy of that snotheaded *Chancellor Puddingfoot*,” the king pursed his lips as if to spit, only stopping at the last moment when he remembered where he was. “Peasants aside, there are quite a few of their lords who have submitted to me, instead, and if I treat them right I will have

some chance of retaining their loyalty even when those lazy idiots finally get their asses off the ground, hoist Puddingfoot offshore and put his son at the wheel. Oh my stars, speaking like a sailor."

Brief chuckles went through the room – the joke wasn't very funny, but it wasn't *bad* per se and Platinum was the king, so you laughed at his jokes when he made them – but none too soon the king went on. "What then if I am king of the Unicorns? Would that mean I have no authority over them? It may seem a mere thing of semantics, but sometimes it takes little more than that to change discontent to rebellion. We have already begun transforming our kingdom – *our* kingdom! – into something more solid, an actual state rather than a collection of petty lords and dukes united under a strong leader that will fall apart to nothing once a crisis of any kind comes along. I do not want princess Platinum to inherit a throne and a title; I want my child to have my kingdom!"

The king's voice echoed around the large stone chamber, as did the dull sound of his hoof striking the floor. The king was well known for being passionate, but even I was surprised by this display of fury. For a moment I felt some envy toward my sister for this; her husband, king or not, positively doted on their only child. Then again, from what I've heard of their relationship it is hardly a thing to envy in itself. She married him for his status, and he married her to gain legitimacy to our late father's crown. At least he does not claim it outright – Heritor, he calls himself, but unlike many others he has had sense enough to not actually claim the Golden Crown as his own.

And suddenly, the waiting was all over. Bluehart rose and stomped his hoof twice, making the floor ring like a stone-hewn bell. "Enough, my king. You have my support." He thrust his face well inside Platinum's comfort zone, and frowned deeply. "I will not say I like it, but there is a need of it being done." He backed off, but the intense frown on his face remained. "There is no use in waiting. I wish you luck in convincing the others. Your majesty," he finished, kneeling briefly.

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The scene in front of my mind's eye dissolved into swirling masses of watery nothingness as the memory my apprentice had sent me ended, but the recollection remained firm inside my mind. I was surprised – very much so, indeed – yet most of all, I was proud of what she had accomplished.

Even I had never been well versed enough in magics dealing with the astral realm such as this one, and that my filly of an apprentice – well, at the very least she was still a quite young mare – had managed to surpass *me* was beyond extraordinary. Were it not for who she was, I would most definitely have taken her in as my personal student, and possibly betroth her to one of my many grandsons or so, to tie her to the family; but alas, that was not to be.

Princess Mercuria, youngest daughter of the late king Aurum and sister to Argentine, king Platinum's queen consort, gave me an expectant look. “Master Starswirl, did it work? Did you see it?”

I gave her a pondering look, still trying to decide what her discovery meant – for me, as her master, but also for me, as a mage.

Evidently the young mare was displeased with me not answering right away. Her horn lit up, shining bright green, and she gave a sharp tug at my long white beard. “Starswirl!” she huffed at me impatiently, pouting best she could. Which was quite well indeed, but only goes to show she is little more than a filly yet.

I decided it was in both out best interests to avoid having the young princess throw a tantrum, so I nodded at her in reply. Immediately, her face shone up with a beaming smile. “Yes, princess, I saw it. It was quite perfect, actually. There were quite a few reflections of your own in there, as well – it seems that our conscious thoughts are transferred as well, along with everything else. You have made quite a discovery, Mercury.”

The young princess was immensely pleased with my praise of her, and did not seem to mind me using the male form of her name. In my case, it was purely out of habit. She was the first mare I'd ever apprenticed, and if I got the chance to finish educating her, she might even become the first female mage in history. In her case, it was probably out of ignorance.

To someone of my generation, referring to a mare named Marisa as Mars would've been greatly frowned upon if done in private, and possibly perceived as quite insulting – definitely so if it was the other way around. While stallions seldom used mare's names even in these days, it seemed that the opposite case was becoming more and more common. Quite likely it had – at least in part – to do with the king's new inheritance laws, allowing mares to inherit and own land on the same grounds as stallions. He was a reformer in many ways, Platinum was, and the memory I'd received from the princess only confirmed it once again.

Once more I noticed the impatient girl looking at me, this time with a worried frown on her youthful face. She was probably dithering over why I had suddenly stopped talking – one did never really understand the workings of an old pony's mind until you were one yourself. I'd learned that lesson long ago.

I gave her an encouraging smile, and an idea rose up in my head. “You know, princess, Archmage Clover and the other mages here in Cante-Wirl have been asking me about building a Lighthouse of our own, so we don't need to rely on the Crystal Empire all so much. The king has told me he's thought about it himself, too, but I've never really...”

I drifted off again – by choice, this time, mainly because I knew there'd be little point in explaining all the details to the princess. She knew all the facts already, but she wouldn't be quite ready for the politics of it all until she was a bit older. So I simply went on to present my idea to her.

“Princess Mercury,” I began, only realizing I'd once again used the male form of her name after the fact, “how would you like it if I named our Lighthouse after you? This discovery of yours is beyond revolutionary, and I feel this is an honor to be bestowed from master to apprentice. You hardly lack gold of your own, and my knowledge is – or will be – all yours already. The naming of a Lighthouse is, I believe, the grandest gift I can give you, and for this, I would give it gladly.”

Mercury only stared at me with an amazed look in her eyes, gaping wide. It took several seconds before she even blinked, and she did that several times

before she managed to close her mouth, stuttering as she spoke. “Y-you you'd d-do that? For me?”

I smiled at her again, and nodded sagely, pride beaming in my heart as I regarded my apprentice. This, she was more than worthy of, and she was too humble to even consider it. “Yes, my dear apprentice. Yes, I very much would.”

It took several minutes before my sagacious patience could break the princess out of her revelry, and return us to the matters of magic we were here for. “Now, I'm sure you'll have time to celebrate this later. However, there's something we need to do first. Would you show me how to cast that spell, Mercury?”

I had picked up plenty of its structure the first time she'd used it, but nonetheless a few peculiar hours we spent with our roles reversed – Princess Mercuria as the master, and duke Starswirl the Bearded of Cante-Wirl himself as the apprentice. The sun stood low, its red light gleaming through the windows as I gathered my magic; formed inside my mind, I crystallized my memories of today's lesson, and used the spell she'd just taught me to transfer them to the princess.

In more days than one, this was a day none of us would ever forget.

Archive #0, Entry #2: The Lighthouse

The Lighthouse

Archive #0, Entry #2

Summer, 5th year of the reign of King Platinum of Unicornia

Location: Outside the gates of Castle Ambrosia, high seat of Duke Starswirl

Duchy of Cante-Wirl, Unicornia

“Do you see it, Mercuria?” The aging unicorn raised a hoof toward the not all too distant silhouette of a solitary tower, rising like a spear toward the evening sky. The question was a bit unnecessary, in my opinion – then again, Starswirl *was* getting fairly old. He may well have had a hard time actually seeing that far in this light – he does use spectacles, but he has told me many times that they really only help with reading.

But indeed I did see it. The Mercury Lighthouse basked in the red light of dusk, and shone back with a bluish light of its own. It was a quite majestic structure, yes – but that was *nothing* to the pride I felt whenever I set my eyes on it. This grand tower, this centerpiece of royal architecture; this *magnum opus* of magic and technology was not only built in my honor, but also built to my design.

The lighthouse was not yet finished, of course. Ever since the duke had presented me with the project I had taken a great interest in the arts of construction and engineering, both magical and mundane, and together we had studies works of all kinds; from reports on the Crystal Palace and its towers, to every imaginable castle in the kingdom.

There were even notes on the pegasi and their cloud cities, though they were scarce. The Kingdom's ties with our more warlike cousins to the west had never been very good – pegasi were a brawny and militaristic lot, and saw any kind of state larger than their own as a threat and eventual enemy.

The largest single union of pegasi were in the hands of Commander Hurricane the Second, barely a third the size of Unicornia and with not even a fifth the population – troop numbers and lack of magic aside, there was no wonder the pegasi felt threatened by the Kingdom's emergence.

With the aid of the Archmage Clover and his Council of Mages, the Craftsman’s Guild of Cante-Wirl had started the construction of the lighthouse in the spring of last year, celebrating the formal coronation of King Platinum as King of Unicornia. While initially boosted by the general sense of revelry that swept across the nation following the codification of the state, things had slowed to a crawl by autumn for a very simple reason.

None of the mages actually *knew* how to build a lighthouse.

It hadn't been done in ages – legends of the Old Empire aside, the only one that remained from that lost age was situated in the far north, and the Crystal Empire had never been keen on revealing its secrets to outsiders.

Archmage Clover had barged in on one of my sessions with Starswirl to deliver that very message, and I managed to persuade him to give me a look at the plans – it was, in a way, *my* tower after all. It didn't take me much time to realize just how flawed the initial design was – quite fortunately I was allowed to partake in a ritual at the Crystal Tower a few years ago, and by comparing those spell flows and that design with my own theories I could start sketching up the most necessary corrections right away. Clover was quite taken with my skill, of course, and after a few meetings with the guilds and some paperwork, I was given the honor of being Chief Architect of the Lighthouse project.

Now, a little more than half a year later, the results – *my* results – were quite visible. The Lighthouse had not quite reached its full height yet, but the holed platform of the aerie – where the beacon would be lit – had just been completed yesterday. Now all that remained was the interior work, some ornamenting work on the outside and the aerie spires – most likely not more than a month's work.

The lighthouse – *my* lighthouse! – was so close to completion, and I could barely keep myself from rushing at every task Starswirl gave me with all

the subtlety of a charging minotaur. I was restless, and my master was worried. So he had insisted we take a few days' break from my studies, to allow me to gather my wits – which of course meant that there was something bothering him, and he needed some time alone to make an important decision. Not that he put it that way, but I knew the old coot better than to be fooled by mere words.

With a shake of my head that sent my lush, silvery mane flying in the wind for a few seconds, I circled my master and planted my hooves right in front of him, giving him a serious look. “Starswirl. I know you're worried about something. You've done this every single time there's been something big on your mind, and the pattern isn't really hard to deduce. Why can't you just tell me about it? You know I can help – I'm almost as skilled in most of the arts as you are, now.”

The aged unicorn frowned, and the Crown of Bells under that strange, pointed hat of his tingled faintly as he lowered his head to meet my eyes. “That is precisely the issue, princess. It has been near a decade since I first took you under my wing, and to say that I am anything but proud at your development – your achievements – would be a blatant lie. In fact, I wasn't expecting this day to come nearly as soon as it did...”

Starswirl's eyes lost focus for a moment, gazing off into the distance before snapping back to me. This time, however, it was far less of my master and far more of the duke in that gaze. “Princess Mercuria, my faithful student. The time has come for your apprenticeship to end.”

I was stunned. My mouth hung open, but I couldn't manage words – I tried to stammer a protest, but it wouldn't come. My face was hot, so hot.

“You reached a level of skill beyond that of most common court mages years ago, and when you started making discoveries of your own I had to realize I could not hold you under my wing for much longer. Oh, there are things I can teach you – few things does old age bring like it brings excess knowledge! – but the truth is that I cannot bear to see one as talented as you...stuck, here in the bird's nest. One day, every chick must take flight on its own.”

My legs wobbled as my tears finally started falling, and I flung myself at the old stallion's frame, burying my head in his long, white beard. “M-master...” I couldn't form any words, any thoughts – and magic itself was so far from my mind I might as well have been a pegasus.

Starswirl only gave a fatherly chuckle, however, and raised a hoof to embrace me. It brought a comfort I hadn't realized how much I had depended on, over these years. “There, there. Don't cry, now. This is a moment of celebration! You will be your own mare now, with no pesky old coot like me looking over your shoulder every step of the way.” I couldn't see it, but I felt his beard shift a bit as his lips curved into a smile. “Besides, you stopped calling me 'master' half a year ago. Curious, to hear that from you now. You know, besides the king and my wife, you are the only person who has ever called me by name, like that.”

We stood like that for some time, me drying my tears in his beard and he stroking my head, urging my fears away. He knew, of course. Ever since Aurum died, Starswirl had been the closest thing to a father I had in my life. Losing that anchor a second time...

Naturally, I'd always known this day would come. Somewhere inside me, I'd known. Thinking back on the last few months, I realized Starswirl had been testing me, to see if I was ready. In his eyes, I must've been – and maybe I was ready, at least in part.

I just always thought I'd have time to prepare my heart for this day before it came.

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The sun was well beneath the horizon, and I was lying down at Starswirl's side, clinging to his beard like the symbol of safety it had been for so long. I'd managed to stop crying, at least, but my throat still felt like there was a piece of burning coal stuck inside. More important, however, was the fact that I'd had some time to mull over the concept in my mind. Now, when the inevitable loss of my surrogate father and mentor was less of a fresh, bleeding wound and more of an inescapable fact of fate, I could see the

logic of his decision for what it was. Sound, wise and well-informed – like almost everything else he did.

“Mercuria, I will send word to Throne and the king's court. I know the tradition says that a new mage should make his journey home on his own, but then again most new full mages are both stallions and some ten years your senior...” He drifted off for a bit, before clearing his throat and continuing. “You will be fifteen years old a week from now. I will arrange for festivities to celebrate your graduation, as well as your coming of age. You would do wisely to make plans with the Archmage before that, so that your work can be finished in proper fashion. But either way, I will make sure your sendoff will be the grandest all of Cante-Wirl, nay, all the kingdom has seen in decades! Do you wish for me to request the king's presence, princess? I am sure he would not mind; with the progress you've been making, he may well be considering you for Grand High Mage of the Realm! Well, once you get a few years of experience, at least.”

I managed not to snivel anymore, at least, but speaking was difficult. My voice was hoarse from crying, and I knew my face must've looked like a total mess. But Starswirl had seen me when I'd failed a light spell and turned myself blue for a whole day. Starswirl had seen me when I was too young to even control my magic properly. Starswirl had seen me at my sister's wedding, when I started crying without knowing why. Starswirl knew every embarrassment I had suffered over these last nine years. I had confided in him everything, and it had helped me cope. Cope with the fact that my parents were long dead. Cope with the fact that I was alone in a foreign court, and my own was gone entirely. Cope with the fact that my sister hated me, hated everyone that wasn't her own daughter – and even that was only an assumption on my part.

I was not ashamed for my appearance in front of my master, even if he was not my master anymore.

“I... no. Not the king. Platinum... he surely has enough on his plate anyway.” I fought down the urge to snivel, forcing the impulse to reshape into a sharp breath and a sigh. “Besides, it would defeat the purpose of the feast, no? He... he would draw attention. A king always does.” A brief memory of my youngest days drifted by my mind's eye, a memory of a

stark white stallion with a mane of bursting gold. A lone tear found its way down my cheek, but I shook my head and went on, chasing the image away. “I want this to be... about me. About us. A feast to remember these years we have had, that we can remember when those memories themselves start to fail us. A memory to remember, Starswirl. A memory.”

Starswirl patted my head with a hoof again, and I sunk down to the ground, trying to forget my woes. “Wise words from a wise mare, Mercuria. I shall heed them without question. What sort of master would I be, to refuse your last request as my apprentice? I will remind the king to not let personal matters come before his duties as a monarch.” He paused for a bit, sizing me up with his eyes as if he only now realized I wasn't a foal anymore. “Though I believe I need to send your measurements to the royal tailors. You will need a set of formal robes for *this* kind of event. Oh, and a hat! Every mage worth his salt has at least a hat or two. Bells, I've always liked bells. Wonderful designs you can make with those. I remember one time...”

The aging duke kept talking as the moon's silvery light shone its first rays on the grassy hills outside the castle city, and his words lulled me into a well-needed sleep. Tomorrow, we would have much to do; but tonight, at least, he would still be my master and nothing more.